

### Promising Practices Case Study: Responding to Language Needs in a School Setting (Peel District School Board, Peel)

#### The Initiative

**Background:** Peel region is becoming the destination of choice for diverse newcomer communities, and increasingly racialized communities, whose home or first language is not English, are settling in Peel region. As a result, Peel District Public School Board (PDSB) is the first point of contact for many families with school aged children. While the number of newcomer students entering the PDSB each year is significant, parents with limited English proficiency are hesitant or unable to become involved in their children's learning without support. Thus, culturally sensitive service provision in the context of addressing language barriers is a critical issue for the Board.

**Initiatives:** To respond to the settlement and language access needs of their students and families, PDSB has introduced and offers several programs. One of the Peel Board initiatives, funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), provides a centralized entry point for all newcomers to the school board. Through this initiative, every new student entering the system is linked to necessary supports. For example, *We Welcome The World Centres* connect with new families to identify students' learning needs, support parents and other adults in the household with settlement related referrals and offer additional supports as required. The Settlement Workers In Schools Program (SWIS), known as the Multicultural Settlement Education Partnership (MSEP) in Peel, is another program PDSB uses to promote integration and educate newcomer parents about school services. The services provided under MSEP are culturally and linguistically sensitive, and interpretation is a core component of this program. PDSB uses a blended model for interpretation. Internally, it uses a roster comprised of staff who are multi-lingual teachers and who are willing to assist families needing interpretation services. Externally, PDSB contracts with local interpretation service providers to meet broader system requirements. Also, PDSB uses parent volunteers to help students retain their native tongue. While their children are in the elementary grades, parents and guardians are encouraged to read to students in multiple languages. There is an emphasis on maintaining/valuing dual and/or multiple languages amongst students. PDSB offers international language learning programs on the weekend.

#### Ideal Response

The current funding formula for overall settlement services is tied to the number of newcomer students in each school each year. If resources were not a factor, PDSB would expand program criteria to better meet the language needs of all of its identified students. For example, currently, MSEP workers are assigned to 95 schools in the Peel Board; PDSB would like to provide the MSEP program and MSEP workers in all of its 235 schools. Further, it would like to increase the number of parents served through its programs and the number of families accessing interpreter services. Currently, PDSB strives to translate and make available key pieces of information in the multiple languages spoken by community members. TDSB posts translated documents online and in schools but these are inaccessible to people without computers and those who are not able to access local schools. With additional resources, PDSB could enhance its delivery of services to those facing language barriers.

#### Actual Steps Taken

In order to increase language access and provide equitable services, PDSB collaborates with several

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community partners. For example, PDSB partners with libraries, Interpretation Service providers and many others within the region to plan how best to meet the language needs of the community. Since PDSB offers interpretation and translation services, it collaborates with partner agencies to develop and implement verification processes for translated documents in order to ensure that its services and materials are accurate and meet standards. To this end, PDSB also partners with community agencies to develop guidelines and protocols for the region in order to promote an infrastructure that supports the delivery of effective interpretation services. For example, it has developed interpreter training curriculum, tip sheets, protocol for inter-agency referrals, practice guidelines, etc., in partnership with community organizations.

### Challenges

The PDSB has experienced internal and external challenges in carrying out the above mentioned initiatives. Because the initiatives are funded by CIC and delivered by the PDSB, both the settlement and education sectors need to recognize the value of the initiatives in order for them to be successful. Internally, engaging stakeholders to endorse and actively support the initiatives is a challenge, and therefore, acquiring the approval and support of senior leadership is necessary in order to get the buy-in of other stakeholders. Further, delivering the initiatives requires that protocols and processes be established and adhered to. This can be challenging given the limitations of the project funding and staff time and availability.

Externally, the lack of clear policy surrounding such work from the province and the Ministry of Education, coupled with the difficulty inherent in maneuvering through a large bureaucracy, poses significant challenges to addressing policy questions or concerns. In addition, the competition for limited funding to address increasing community needs strains the relationship between the PDSB and community service providers. Because they are newer “players” in the settlement sector and as a result of their size and bureaucracy, the PDSB can provoke fear and frustration among the broader settlement sector. The PDSB actively addresses issues related to ‘turf’ matters between the settlement sector and the school board and PDSB staff is cognizant of the need to manage relationships with other settlement and community agencies in order to deliver their services effectively.

### Results/Sustainability

**Results:** The initiatives at PDSB have resulted in significant improvements in service accessibility for people with limited English proficiency. For example, PDSB evaluated their initiatives using parent feedback. They found that overall parents feel better informed and supported and more valued. Moreover, the PDSB is better able to identify clients’ needs and to respond to these with improved service delivery mechanisms.

**Sustainability:** Staff state that some program aspects have become integrated completely into the very way that the PDSB does its business, and as such, these will remain in place when or if the specific initiatives come to an end. For example, system administrators, staff and families understand the value of addressing the distinct needs of newcomer students and parents. At the same time, current programs are not fully sustainable without funding and may be compromised if funding is discontinued. For example, funding is required in order for interpreter services to continue to be delivered by the Board.

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